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7-1-2013

# Social Media As Management Fashion - A Discourse Perspective

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### Recommended Citation

Bergquist, Magnus; Ljungberg, Jan; Omair Zaffar, Fahd; and Stenmark, Dick, "Social Media As Management Fashion - A Discourse Perspective" (2013). *ECIS 2013 Completed Research*. 209.

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## **SOCIAL MEDIA AS MANAGEMENT FASHION – A DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

*Social media platforms and services have rapidly grown into an important societal phenomenon, lately also with increased impact on business. The relative novelty of its occurrence in a business context, the lack of well-grounded best practice and the scarcity of research, result in organizational decision-makers having to rely on vendor descriptions and trade press articles to make sense of social media. By using management fashion theory and discourse analysis, we examine how a management fashion discourse on social media unfolds and enacts social media as a disruptive force that managers must consider in the form of e.g. strategies, normative guidelines and policies. Our analysis shows that social media discourse differs somewhat from how previous IT fashions have developed, primarily due to the fact that social media discourse is propelled by forces outside the company. We analyze the discourse constructs identified in the data using management fashion theory and position social media discourse as a particular form of management fashion. The ‘problem discourse’ defines hinders towards strategic development of social media and the reasons for their existence, which provides an agenda for change. The ‘solution discourse’ theorizes social media as a business case and provides arguments for how managers should organize internally to meet the new demands. The ‘bandwagon discourse’ provides role models, policies and codes of conduct for a successful dissemination of social media into the organization.*

*Keywords: Social Media, Corporate Strategy, Management Fashion, Discourse Analysis*

## **1 Introduction**

Social media has rapidly grown into an important societal phenomenon. Services like Facebook and Twitter and sites like Flickr and YouTube have, together with a plethora of other applications aiming at communication and collaboration, become an important part of many people's everyday lives (McAfee, 2009). This broad diffusion has resulted in social media starting to invade also the business scene. Organizations are therefore now struggling to understand if, why and how they could benefit from this development and whether they should make investments in the underlying technology. The potential benefits of social media include the possibility to reach out to customers, stakeholders and citizens and tap into conversations as well as enhancing internal collaboration and communication (O'Reilly, 2007). In many ways social media has become a dominating concept over other related popular terms such as web 2.0 and enterprise 2.0. As a consequence, social media is becoming a new management fashion. However, there seems to be uncertainty what should be included in the concept of 'social media'. The concept appears to refer sometimes to the underpinning technology, sometimes to a medium at a conceptual level, and sometimes to both. Generally, social media refers to a group of Internet-based technologies that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). At the core of these technologies is the capacity to generate, edit, share, evaluate and link content to other creators and information users. The relative novelty of social media, the lack of well-grounded best practice and the scarcity of research result in organizational decision-makers having to rely on vendor descriptions, trade press articles and consultants' white papers to appreciate the potential of social media (Baskerville & Myers, 2009; Ramiller, 2009). This motivates the need for IS research to study how social media actually becomes a management fashion enacted through management reports.

Like in previous waves of management fashions (e.g., workflow systems, business process re-engineering, knowledge management), the proponents raise expectations of the technologies' potentials to improve organizational performance, and call for new corporate strategies to make use of the technology. However, social media as a fashion differs radically from earlier typical IT-fashions in its spectacular diffusion in many sectors, and its penetration of people's everyday life. While a decision on e.g. workflow systems would be an in-house undertaking involving primarily IT-managers, decisions to use social media has already been made by the employees and affect the organization regardless of management. Social media is in this sense impacting companies, whether or not they have a strategy. Further, social media makes the company exposed to forces outside the organizational boundaries in a way that appears different from previous fashions. Put in another way, social media opens up the company for a societal change, entailing a much higher complexity than previous fashions. Due to its dual character of being an everyday phenomena and a means for rationalizing and legitimizing business, several discourses are encapsulated within the organizational framework while social media is incorporated and written into the organization.

In this paper, we investigate how a social media strategy discourse unfolds in strategy consultant and vendor reports, white papers, handbooks and strategy guides. Social media is not addressed as a fashion per se. Instead we use management fashion theory and discourse analysis to examine the normative guidelines and policy recommendations social media consultants and other fashion setters propose. The research question that guides this paper is: *how is social media enacted as a management discourse?*

The paper is organized as follows: first we introduce management fashion theory from a discourse perspective. This is followed by a method section where the selection, collection and coding of the reports is described. The following result section presents the identified discursive constructs, which are then discussed from three fashion perspectives. The paper ends with a conclusion.

## **2 Social Media as Management Fashion Discourse**

### **2.1 Management Fashions**

The dominant perspective in the diffusion of innovation literature reinforces a pro-innovation bias, i.e., it takes for granted that innovations and their diffusions will benefit adopters (Rogers, 1983). It is assumed that adopters make independent, rational choices guided by goals of technical efficiency and never decide to adopt an inefficient administrative technology or to reject an efficient one. It has been claimed that this underlying assumption makes it difficult to address questions on when and how technically inefficient innovations diffuse (Abrahamson, 1991). In order to develop an alternative to the rational, efficient choice perspective on management techniques, Abrahamson developed a theory of management fashions (Abrahamson, 1991; 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Management fashions are shaped by norms of rationality and progress. The rational normative expectation of management techniques (i.e. efficient means to important ends), together with the progressive normative belief that management techniques will progress over time (i.e. will repeatedly be replaced by new or improved techniques), create a market for discourses disseminating rational, progressive management knowledge (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). These discourses are characterized by being emotionally charged, enthusiastic and unreasoned. The typical trendsetters are knowledge entrepreneurs like business school academics, consultants, business gurus, business press writers and technology vendors that have an interest in generating demand for the fashion.

Contrary to the efficient choice perspective, the management fashion theory suggests that organizations imitate each other's adoption of inefficient administrative technology, and that they are influenced by outside fashion setters that lead the diffusion of inefficient innovations or the rejection of efficient innovations. A management fashion is a product of a management-fashion-setting process involving particular management fashion setters – organizations and individuals who dedicate themselves to produce and disseminate management knowledge (Abrahamson, 1996). It is defined as “transitory collective beliefs, disseminated by the discourse of management-knowledge entrepreneurs, that a management technique resides at the forefront of rational management progress” (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999, p. 709).

By studying the life cycles of management fashions like job enrichment and quality circles, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) identified three discourses in a fashion's upswing (problem discourse, solution discourse and bandwagon discourse), and three in its downswing (debunking discourse, surfing and sustaining discourse). The problem discourse of the quality circle fashion, theorized that the global competitive threat, particularly from Japan, was the source of problems facing USA. The solution discourse theorized what responses that were appropriate to that threat, and the bandwagon discourse reported on successful examples of adoption of quality circles. In the debunking discourse, quality circles were completely rejected as an inefficient fad, but without any suggested substitute. A surfing discourse was used to denote how certain knowledge entrepreneurs slide smoothly from one fashion to another, by rejecting the old one in favor of a substitute technique. The sustaining discourse, advocates continued use of a technique, despite problems. It may provide explanations for failures and suggestions to fix problems.

The theory of management fashion easily translate to the area of information systems, and Abrahamson's management fashion theory has been applied on IS either as a source of inspiration (Ramiller, 2001) or more thoroughly applied on IS research and practice (Baskerville & Myers, 2009). Baskerville and Myers (2009) follow Abrahamson quite strictly and give the same arguments, e.g. pointing out the importance for academics to engage in the fashion setting discourse. They follow the lifecycles of four fashions: office automation, computer-aided software engineering, business process re-engineering, and e-commerce. They define an IT fashion as “a transitory collective belief that an information technology is new, efficient and at the forefront of practice” (ibid p. 64). It is important to note that even if fads and fashions are technically inefficient, they may benefit an organization if they

are symbolically efficient, e.g. by projecting an image of innovativeness (Abrahamson, 1991; Wang, 2010); for political reasons (Newell et al., 1998), or in collective learning processes (Wang & Ramiller, 2009). Wang (2010) points to the effect that following a fashion can have in terms of legitimizing organizations and their executives, regardless of performance improvement.

Wang (2010) also points out the core issue of IT-management fashions: vendors, consultants, market analysts and gurus are producing the discourse constituting the next big thing and the image of what it means to be at the forefront, while executives and IT-managers simultaneously are on the lookout for the next big thing in IT that will improve their organization's ability to perform and compete. Currently one of the most dominating upswing discourses in IT concerns how to take advantage of social media, and what strategies to rely on doing this.

## **2.2 Social Media Strategy: A Discourse Lens**

Management reports on social media can be seen as part of ongoing discursive practices where media is used to shape individual and collective decision-making (Cukier et al., 2009), which calls for a theoretical lens that captures the constituting dimension of such reports. A discourse is the way a certain object is spoken about, that systematically forms or constitutes that object of which it speaks (Foucault, 1972; Winter Jørgensen & Philips, 2000). Discourse analysis focuses on texts, which can be in the form of written texts or other form of narratives (Alvarez, 2002; Doolin, 2003; Iivari, 2010; Winter Jørgensen & Philips, 2000). The reports are injected with strategic significance, which contributes to the social media discourse and gives it the power to invoke and advocate organizations to act in a certain way (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Vasconcelos, 2007). Managers addressed in the reports are prompted to act in their role as drivers of change and development. In this way the discourse constitutes social reality, and forms an organizing vision of the future that will function as an engine for development (Burton Swanson & Ramiller, 1997; Chia, 2000; Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

There are three important aspects of an organizing vision for IS innovation processes (Burton Swanson & Ramiller, 1997). The first aspect is *interpretation*, which concerns the vision's ability to make sense to organizational actors. Social media is not immediately available to managers as an engine of innovation. On the contrary, it can be argued that social media has largely developed outside the organization and is associated with individuals' private digital communication and interaction. The management reports provide actors with the necessary interpretations to see the purpose of social media in an organizational context. It places the discourse in a broader purposeful technical, economic and social context and thus reduces uncertainties about the expected outcome of social media for the organization's performance, as well as defines what response the organization must mobilize to take advantage of the innovation (Burton Swanson & Ramiller, 1997). The "prepare for social media" narrative identified in the social media reports is established, elaborated and operationalized to present an anticipated future of social media practices, and defines possibilities and threats to the organization based on that view of the world.

The second aspect is *legitimization* of the vision. Here the IS innovation is scrutinized from the perspective of the perceived outcome, and it is motivated why the organization should embrace the particular innovation. Social media has not historically shown a potential for companies that easily would motivate an uptake of a social media strategy. Legitimization grounds the innovation in the broader business context and gives both social media and its anticipated organizational propagators the authority to act on behalf of the strategic advantages the innovation will create. Legitimization often links the innovation to a larger structural change as a way to meet the challenge, and has been proved to have a positive effect on organizational reputation (Staw & Epstein, 2000). The business process reengineering (BPR) vision (Hammer & Champy, 1993) was legitimized as a response to an industrial era that had come to an end (Burton Swanson & Ramiller, 1997). Similar arguments were advocated in the so called "dotcom bubble" during the late 1990s, where the age of industry was pronounced dead and replaced by the digital age built on a new digital economy of e-business (Panko, 2008). The point is not whether the vision is right or wrong. Both BPR and e-business have proven important even

if not in the way the visions projected the future. Instead the importance of the visions comes from how they facilitate the process of innovating.

The third aspect is *mobilization*, in order to activate, motivate and organize forces to realize the vision (Burton Swanson & Ramiller, 1997). This phase is more hands on in the sense that mobilization brings about activities such as conference expositions, giving exposure and making the vision concrete and tangible. The management reports studied here are to some extent part of mobilization as the companies that produce the reports often consult in the area, and the reports can be an indirect showcase for systems, solutions and competences needed when realizing the social media vision. Mobilization is a creative force and developing social media as a marketplace for organizations extends the existing market for social media where the users are mainly conceptualized as private end users outside the company.

### **3 Methodology**

This study is an investigation of management discourse, i.e., the collective vocabulary used in social practice when referring to a phenomenon. As Abrahamson and Fairchild point out, a management fashion discourse is emotionally charged, enthusiastic, and unreasoned (1999). This basically excludes scientific papers. Consequently, we use generally available reports, white papers, handbooks and strategy guides as our data on social media as fashion discourses. Building on Miles and Huberman's (1994) principles of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, Romano et al. (2003) suggest a similar method when dealing with web-based qualitative data, which they refer to as elicitation, reduction and visualization. Below our application of the steps is described.

*Elicitation* means collecting the data and in our case this was done by querying Google for papers on corporate social media management strategy. When identifying a discourse it is imperative to retrieve as much of the relevant information as possible. One cannot find (or digest) everything but a systematic approach that captures the most influential voices must be ensured. We used the Google search engine to identify and collect PDF reports for two reasons; Google is reported to be the market leader in most Western countries (Beel et al., 2010) and; Google use a page rank algorithm that incorporate the judgment of other web commentators (Brin & Page, 1998). Using Google thus gave both the best coverage (i.e., finding most of the document related to the topic) and the best precision (i.e., ranking the most influential papers highest). This method is not able to access documents behind company firewalls. However, such documents are not part of a public and general discourse.

We specifically searched for documents in the Portable Document Format (PDF) for two reasons. First, unlike a web page or a blog, which is constantly under construction, a PDF connotes stability and gives a more formal status to a text. A PDF document contains a finalized text that is ready for distribution. Secondly, the PDF format has become a de-facto standard for electronic document exchange that a large number of companies have adopted as a preferred format (Castiglione et al., 2010).

The search terms 'social media strategy corporate management' were used in combination with advanced features where language was set to 'English', regions to 'all regions', updated to 'anytime', and file type 'PDF files (.pdf)'. The top 500 reports were selected for further investigation.<sup>1</sup>

*Reduction* is an iterative process of selection, coding and clustering (Romano et al., 2003). For the selection process we used three different retention criteria: 1. Documents should explicitly mention corporate social media strategy. 2. Documents should target management and decision makers, and 3. Documents should have been written by management/strategy consultants in social media. Having screened

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<sup>1</sup> A table with reference numbers and links to all the chosen 165 reports is available at: <http://document.chalmers.se/download?docid=86d9663d-cc99-4fc1-a2f3-0577daa9a25f>

the 500 documents, 165 documents were found to fulfil all three criteria. They constituted a total of 3,232 pages.

Elicitation		Reduction		Visualization
Collection	Top 500 PDFs reports were collected using Google search engine.	Reduction Criteria	1. Documents should explicitly mention corporate social media strategy 2. Documents should target management and decision makers 3. Documents should be authored by management/strategy consultants portrayed as experts on social media	1. Aggregated code clusters with themes and subthemes  2. Identification of discursive constructs
Search term	Social media strategy corporate management			
Language	English	Selection	165 reports were selected based on the reduction criteria	
Region	All			
Time	Updated to anytime	Coding	Main categories identified: purpose, motivation, normative guidelines, risks, challenges and degree of empirical backing	
File Type	PDF			

Table 1. A method to analyze internet-based qualitative data adapted from (Romano et al., 2003).

Coding and clustering were done in a grounded, bottom-up fashion. The first round of coding took place during the reduction process, while going through the documents to match them to the three reduction criteria, we also became immersed with the data and begun to explore the content for recurring themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After the reduction was finished, the coding continued, including axial coding where we constructed categories and subcategories. As is common in the practice of grounded theory (Urquhart, 2007), this coding was not in the form of neat linear rounds, but we constantly moved between axial and open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes were successively added to a common code book to form an initial coding scheme (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were subsequently discussed and renamed until a consensus was reached amongst the authors.

By using tables to *visualize* the tentative results, we grouped the codes to form larger clusters of related topics. These were also subject to discussions and renaming. We identified three broad thematic topics in the reports. Then, through continuing this iterative process we identified five discursive constructs that appeared central to the reports, which are analyzed in the Discussion section, and related to the fashion discourses in Abramson and Fairchild's theory of management fashions.

## 4 Result

We here describe three main themes of how social media strategy was communicated in the reports.

### 4.1 What counts as social media?

A majority of the reports (129) neglect to provide an explicit definition of what is social media. It appears to be tacitly assumed that everyone knows what is meant. Some (e.g., pdf166: IBM or pdf389: SanDisk), simply mention the phrase social media and immediately start to discuss various steps for how to set up a suitable strategy. However, many (36) of the reports refer to specific applications and services, and thereby provide a broad spectrum of examples of what they count as social media. These illustrations serve as an implicit definition of what social media entails, although no explicit definition is provided.

Many of these provided examples belong to the *communication category*, including blogging tools (Blogger, Twitter, WordPress) and social networking tools (Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace). Another well-represented category is *collaboration*, including tool social bookmarking (Delicious), social news

making (Digg, Reddit) and collaborative authoring (Wikipedia, Google+). A third category is *multimedia*, which include photo sharing (Flickr, Zoomr), video sharing (YouTube, Vimeo), livecasting (Ustream.tv, Stickam), slide sharing (Slideshare) and music sharing (Last.fm, imeem). A fourth and last category is labelled *entertainment* and contain virtual worlds (Second Life) and Game sharing (Miniclip, Kongregate). In addition to specific applications such as these above, technologies such as blogs and wikis are frequently mentioned in more general manners.

Application and technical layers are sometimes mixed (9 reports). In an IBM Global Business Services whitepaper (pdf118) the author writes:

*“People are using social media channels to not only communicate with their friends and family about their every day lives, but to talk to other people about their customer experience with companies and organizations. Customers can now blog, post messages on Facebook, podcast, or twitter about their customer experience and reach a wide array of other customers, or potential customers, to promote positive or negative word-of-mouth advertising. Social media channels have become a quick and easy way for customers to talk about what is on their mind in real-time.”*

Attempts are also in some cases (18 reports) made to define what social media is, circling around references to Internet-based technology, and user generated content and free exchange of content:

*“Social media is the production, consumption and exchange of information through online social interactions and platforms.”* (pdf400: Marketo, Inc. whitepaper)

*“Social media is broadly understood as web-based services which enable users to interact with each other [...]”* (pdf187: Marketwire whitepaper)

## **4.2 Motivation for creating a social media strategy**

Twenty-five reports have a focus on what is described as the double nature of the massive diffusion of social media. That it is something that both create opportunities and threats. There is a set of opportunities in making communication and collaboration both internally and externally more efficient, to increase creativity and innovation and to reach out to customers and other stakeholders. There is also a set of threats. These sometimes overlap as a potential threat easily can be rephrased as a potential opportunity. Broadly speaking we identified four different arguments why companies should develop a strategy for social media; Risk of being left behind, Risk of losing control, Risk of productivity drop and Opportunity for trust building.

Starting with the risk of being “left behind”, the massive penetration of social media through entire society and everyday life is something that has a high impact on individuals as well as on companies and public organizations. It is argued that soon everyone will use social media to communicate and collaborate, and those who for one reason or another do not engage will be overrun by both customers and competitors. Social media is like a freight train on the move – an unstoppable force that you do not want to get in the way of. Instead, you should board it as soon as possible as it will otherwise leave you alone on the platform.

*“Social media is changing the world – and it is forcing organizations like the [name of particular org] to rethink communications and marketing strategies and to learn to navigate this new online landscape – or be left behind”* (pdf65: City of Kitchener Online Communication Strategy)

*“Early adopters are gaining real economic value from their investments in social media”* (pdf28: Bain & Company)

Another way to motivate companies to engage in social media strategies is to appeal to their perceived “need for control”. Previously, information was issued via press releases and through appointed spokespersons and organisations were in control of their communication, it is argued, but with social media any employee, sub-contractor or customer can have an opinion that is shared by thousands of people.



*“With the advent of digital and social media, communication anarchy is the new norm. Social media has shifted control of the corporate message away from the organization and towards the consumers and other stakeholders, and running away and hiding is no longer the safe”* (pdf63: Burson-Marsteller)

The debate that goes on in social media is outside the control of the company but avoiding engagement and try to ride it out is no longer an option, according to these reports. But it is not only about what people outside the organisation do, management also risks losing control over the employees, the reports warn.

*“Take precautions: develop a policy to govern your employees’ use of social media. Also use social media to monitor, enhance and protect your brand/reputation.”* (pdf408: Computer Science Corporation)

A third motivator, slightly overlapping with the previous, is the risk of “trash-talking” that could damage a company’s image should proper social media strategies not be in place. Customers or competitors may – correctly or incorrectly – say negative things about the company that would spread rapidly and negatively affect the company’s reputation. The diffusion of social media has also blurred the borders between what you do as a professional and what you do as a private citizen. When you blog or tweet it is not always clear if what you communicate represents your personal opinion or that of your company. Hence, not only people outside the organisation can damage its image; employees risk doing it too. Referring to social media as “nightmare in real time” an Ernest & Young report reported what they claim to be “recent examples that illustrate the challenge social media can pose for companies that are unprepared”:

*“Someone with access to an international manufacturer’s Twitter account sent out tweets containing swear words, forcing the company to revisit its account security access procedures.”* (pdf33: Ernest & Young)

While 16 PDFs focus on the risks with social media engagement, and stress that a social media strategy should be implemented to mitigate such risks, nine PDFs highlight the opportunities that social media entails (or the risk of missing the opportunity of getting a competitive advantage through social media). One opportunity mentioned explicitly is the possibility for company-customer “trust-building” that a sincere social media dialogue can open. Even better is when satisfied customers use social media to promote a company or its products. By actively monitoring user forums companies can also customize their information to match the needs of their audience.

*“The most trusted form of advertising today is a recommendation from another person ‘just like me.’ Tapping into these conversations shows where your audience is spending time online and what subjects and issues are of interest to them”* (pdf169: Expansion Plus).

### **4.3 Organizing for social media**

More than a fourth of the reports (44) have explicit hands-on advise to organizations on how they should implement a social media strategy. These tend to be of a normative character suggesting for example five, seven, or ten steps to a successful social media usage (e.g. pdf18: Spreadfast, pdf44: Marektwire, and pdf227: Awareness). Many of the suggestions regard how one should organize the engagement in social media in terms of activities like tracking followers, number of likes and tone of comments from consumers and stakeholders, as well as monitoring the social media initiatives. Other suggestions regard which professional roles and departments that should be involved and in charge when it comes to social media strategy and implementation.

The reports differ in where responsibilities of social media should belong. A large portion of the reports point out existing roles and departments as key actors. Marketing, public relations, human relations, and communication are among those departments most often mentioned to be responsible for social media strategies.

*“Marketing and sales are two functions that are intimately linked with social media.”* (pdf265: Accenture)

*“Newer areas including social media are now also falling under the Chief Communications Officer (CCO)[..]”.* (pdf314: Korn/Ferry Institute)

IT department and Chief Information Officers (CIO) are also mentioned, but to a less degree.

*“The IT function, by virtue of the technology-driven nature of social media, is also in the ‘high-impact’ zone. While the job of the chief information officer has become broader and more influential in the past two decades, social media expands the CIO’s role even further.”* (pdf265: Accenture)

Another recurrent theme claims the need for new roles, and some even new departments.

*“Corporations have anointed an Open Leader, the Social Strategist [...] this emerging role is critical in the adoption of new media for corporations.”* (pdf390: Altimeter)

*“Your company will have a social media department”* (pdf 24: Linkage)

## 5 The discursive enactment of Social Media Fashion

Building on research on management fashions (Abrahamson 1991; 1996; Baskerville & Myers 2009; Newell et al. 2001) we show how social media is discursively enacted as relevant and attractive for organizations, and how managers are addressed with normative prescriptions on how to act. From the earlier described three broad basic themes, we identified five discursive constructs central to the reports (Table 2). The first construct makes sense of social media by defining it in relation to existing technologies, applications and services and elaborates its relevance for organizations; the second defines a social media disruption and builds arguments for why social media is unavoidable for organizations; the third construct creates social media as an actionable goal for companies and defines anticipated benefits for the organization; the fourth construct defines normative models for managers to use when preparing the organization for successful social media implementation; the fifth construct provides what could be considered as evidence that following the prescriptions would lead to success.

Construct	Discursive logic	Empirical example
Sensemaking	Homogenizing diversity of technologies into ‘social media’ is necessary for anchoring its relevance for organizations	The reports impose companies to use a particular social media to communicate with customers
Disruption	Structural changes towards a social media society makes it unavoidable for managers and organizations	“Communication anarchy” calls for entirely new management strategies
Strategic advantage	Early adoption creates strategic advantages. Non-action implies hazardous consequences	The blogging CIO meets stakeholders online which makes communication easy and efficient
Organizational consequences	Prescribes normative models and actions scripts for managers and organizations	Elaborates on new roles, departments, policies, and competences needed
Evidence	“Proves” social media importance by success stories and data on success	X.xx % of companies with a social media strategy earn Y.yy % more money

Table 2. Social media fashion discourse matrix

In the following, the above discursive constructs are related to three of the discourses in the theory of management fashions by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999): the problem discourse, the solution discourse, and the bandwagon discourse. These three discourses are defined as generic discourses in management fashion, and are identified in the fashion upswing, i.e. when a fashion is introduced and is making its way to the centre of attention. The problem discourse is built up mainly from the two first

constructs: sensemaking and disruption. The solution discourse is mainly built up from the strategic advantage and organizational consequences constructs. Finally, the bandwagon discourse is mainly built up by the evidence construct, where examples of success or statistics of success serve as arguments that social media strategies really work. The three downswing discourses identified by the authors are left out since they were not recognized in our sample of reports used to identify the social media discourse. There can be two reasons for this. One is that social media is in an upswing phase. In systems of discourses some discourses tend to dominate on behalf of others (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2011). Social media appears to be in a process of increased attention in the studied management reports, which could explain the lack of examples of discourses that dominate the downswing phase. The other reason could be that the applied search terms, especially 'strategy' might promote discourses dominating upswing fashion.

## **5.1 Problem discourse**

The problem discourse proposes different explanations of specific hindrances towards strategic development and the reasons for their existence, which provides an agenda for change. There are few problem discourses identified within IS management fashion. However, Baskerville and Myers (2009) report on the previously mentioned example with BPR. The BPR management fashion discourse built on the argument that the old organization often hampers possibilities offered by information technology. Organizations must therefore be re-engineered to fully take advantage of IT. The social media problem discourse is different in that it has developed outside the organization and its benefits have not primarily been connected to organizations and thus the realm of management strategy work. Facebook, Twitter and blogs are commonly seen as something that connects to people's private life. The reports therefore need to make sense of social media by defining it and connecting to business as a way to power the organization to take a certain course of action (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008). Boundaries between 'social media' and 'other media' are blurred and there is no clear nexus of what characterizes the former. The discourse offers structures according to different categories which also create boundaries for what social media is not. Such discursive practices of homogenization enact 'social media' as a relatively consistent phenomenon with high societal disruptive impact, which is now hitting the organization. The "logical consequence" is that managers must take action to meet the challenge. Another contributory factor is the blurring of borders between the company and the outside world that makes phenomena such as social media a concern also for the organization's internal strategic work. Social media integrates the professional and private role and makes them hard to distinguish. In combination with the ease of use, availability and short distance to publicize, a potential risk emerges: the blogging CIO is a potential hazard, which calls for management action. Policies, standards and organizational routines can be presented as "anxiety-reducing solutions" (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

## **5.2 Solution discourse**

Establishing social media as a graspable phenomenon and defining problems and threats that call for action opens up for the solution discourse, which is a fashion upswing discourse describing the fashion with claims that it is all powerful in scope and impact (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). This discourse makes social media compatible with the company's mainstream activities by defining it as a business case. An investment in social media will – if done right – result in profit. The discourse divides activities in internal and external solutions. Internal social media efforts make global scale sharing of information and collaboration easy and efficient. Increased competition calls for rapid innovation. Social media can spur change, which in combination with the statement that especially early adopters gain the highest economic value, sets out a course for internal renewal of companies. External social media solution discourse focuses on new ways to connect with customers. Social media is a low cost effective market channel with technologies for making customers loyal and exposed to information. An important argument is here the crowd-sourcing abilities of social media in that it connects

customer capabilities to the company via poll technologies and access to customer profiles and networks. As a consequence social media can become aligned to brand equity strategies. Social media is ascribed the potential to connect the firm brand via individual representatives for the company who communicate with customers via interest groups. Companies can create Facebook-communities where customers make clusters of ‘likes’ visible to potential customers; followers on Twitter and subscribers to blogs co-construct the brand and create trust-based relationships.

### **5.3 Bandwagon discourse**

The bandwagon discourse is a fashion upswing discourse that theorizes successful firm adoption of the fashion. In what seems to be an attempt to compensate the fuzziness of social media, the impact is objectified with numbers referring to studies stating e.g. the percentage of companies that are involved in social media efforts or by referring to the “millions of users out there” who make up the infrastructure for social media success that will make the company invest in a particular platform. Speed metaphors are used to theorize success of both internal and external social media investments. An important aspect of enacting the bandwagon is the issue of preparing for social media. Organizations need to monitor, track and manage, which put demands on maintenance. The whole company must be involved and a company wide strategy is needed. The discourse thus defines the manager as the active change agent at the centre of the corporation. Delegation is suggested in the form of new roles and responsibilities sometimes even social media departments. The reports include normative set of rules or steps needed to pursue a successful social media implementation.

## **6 Conclusion**

Social media platforms and services have rapidly grown into an important societal phenomenon. The lack of well-grounded best practice and the scarcity of research, result in organizational decision-makers having to rely on vendor descriptions and trade press articles to make sense of social media. By using management fashion theory and discourse analysis, we have examined how a management fashion discourse on social media unfolds and enacts social media as both the next big thing in IT and a disruptive force that calls for management action and corporate strategies. Our analysis shows that social media discourse differs somewhat from how previous IT fashions have developed, primarily due to the fact that social media discourse is propelled by forces outside the company, entailing both risk and opportunity. Social media still seems to be in its upswing phase, and there are few signs for any emerging downswing.

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